

CHAPTER XXXI

OLD GREEK FRAGMENTS

THE other day when we were reading some of the poems in "Ionica," I promised to speak in another short essay of Theocritus and his songs or idyls of Greek peasant life, but in speaking of him it will be well also to speak of others who equally illustrate the fact that everywhere there is truth and beauty for the mind that can see. I spoke last week about what I thought the highest possible kind of literary art might become. But the possible becoming is yet far away; and in speaking of some old Greek writers I want only to emphasize the fact that modern literary art as well as ancient literary art produced their best results from a close study of human nature.

Although Theocritus and others who wrote idyls found their chief inspiration in the life of the peasants, they sometimes also wrote about the life of cities. Human nature may be studied in the city as well as in the country provided that a man knows how to look for it. It is not in the courts of princes nor the houses of nobles nor the residences of the wealthy that such study can be made. These superior classes have found it necessary to show themselves to the world very cautiously; they live by rule, they conceal their emotions, they move theatrically. But the ordinary, everyday people of cities are very different; they speak their thoughts, they keep their hearts open, and they let us see, just as children do, the good or the evil side of their characters. So a good poet and a good observer can find in the life of cities subjects of study almost as easily as in the country. Theocritus has done this in his fifteenth idyl. This idyl is very famous, and it has been translated hun-

dreds of times into various languages. Perhaps you may have seen one version of it which was made by Matthew Arnold. But I think that the version made by Lang is even better.

The scene is laid in Alexandria, probably some two thousand years ago, and the occasion is a religious holiday—a *matsuri*, as we call it in Japan. Two women have made an appointment to go together to the temple, to see the festival and to see the people. The poet begins his study by introducing us to the chamber of one of the women.

Gorgo. “Is Praxinoë at home?”

Praxinoë. “Dear Gorgo, how long is it since you have been here! She *is* at home. The wonder is that you have got here at last! Eunoë, see that she has a chair. Throw a cushion on it too.”

G. “It does most charmingly as it is.”

P. “Do sit down.”

How natural this is. There is nothing Greek about it any more than there is Japanese; it is simply human. It is something that happens in Tokyo every day, certainly in houses where there are chairs and where it is a custom to put a cushion on the chair for the visitor. But remember, this was two thousand years ago. Now listen to what the visitor has to say.

“Oh, what a thing spirit is! I have scarcely got to you alive, Praxinoë! What a huge crowd, what hosts of carriages! Everywhere cavalry boots, everywhere men in uniform! And the road is endless: yes, you really live *too* far away!”

Praxinoë answers:

“It is all the fault of that madman of mine. Here he came to the ends of the earth and took—a hole, not a house, and all that we might not be neighbours. The jealous wretch, always the same, anything for spite!”

She is speaking half in jest, half in earnest; but she forgets that her little boy is present, and the visitor reminds her of the fact:

“Don’t talk of your husband like that, my dear girl, before the little boy,—look how he is staring at you! Never mind, Zopyrion, sweet child, she is not speaking about papa.”

P. “Our Lady! (Persephone) The child takes notice.”

Then the visitor to comfort the child says “Nice papa!” and the conversation proceeds. The two talk about their husbands, about their dresses, about the cost of things in the shops; but in order to see the festival Praxinoë must dress herself quickly, and woman, two thousand years ago, just as now, takes a long time to dress. Hear Praxinoë talking to her maid-servant while she hurries to get ready:

“Eunoë, bring the water and put it down in the middle of the room, lazy creature that you are. Cats like always to sleep soft! Come, bustle, bring the water; quicker. I want water first, and how she carries it! give it me all the same; don’t pour out so much, you extravagant thing. Stupid girl! Why are you wetting my dress? There, stop, I have washed my hands as heaven would have it. Where is the key of the big chest? Bring it here.”

This is life, natural and true; we can see those three together, the girlish young wife hurrying and scolding and chattering naturally and half childishly, the patient servant-girl smiling at the hurry of her mistress, and the visitor looking at her friend’s new dress, wondering how much it cost and presently asking her the price. At last all is ready. But the little boy sees his mother go out and he wants to go out too, though it has been decided not to take him, because the crowd is too rough and he might be hurt. Here the mother first explains, then speaks firmly:

“No, child, I don’t mean to take you. Boo! Bogies! There’s a horse that bites! Cry as much as you please, but I cannot have you lamed.”

They go out, Praxinoë and Gorgo and the maid-servant Eunoë. The crowd is tremendous, and they find it very hard to advance. Sometimes there are horses in the way, sometimes wagons, occasionally a legion of cavalry. We

know all this, because we hear the chatter of the women as they make their way through the press.

“Give me your hand, and you, Eunoë, catch hold of Eutythis; never lose hold of her, for fear lest you get lost. . . . Here come the King’s war-horses! My dear man, don’t trample on me. . . . Eunoë, you foolhardy girl, will you never keep out of the way? . . . Oh! How tiresome, Gorgo, my muslin veil is torn in two already! For heaven’s sake, sir, if you ever wish to be fortunate, take care of my shawl!”

Stranger. “I can hardly help myself, but for all that I will be as careful as I can.”

The strange man helps the women and children through the pushing crowd, and they thank him very prettily, praying that he may have good fortune all his life. But not all the strangers who come in contact with them happen to be so kind. They come at last into that part of the temple ground where the image of Adonis is displayed; the beauty of the statue moves them, and they utter exclamations of delight. This does not please some of the male spectators, one of whom exclaims, “You weariful women, do cease your endless cooing talk! They bore one to death with their eternal broad vowels!”

They are country women, and their critic is probably a purist—somebody who has studied Greek as it is pronounced and spoken in Athens. But the women bravely resent this interference with their rights.

Gorgo. “Indeed! And where may this person come from? What is it to you if we *are* chatterboxes? Give orders to your own servants, sir. Do you pretend to command ladies of Syracuse? If you must know, we are Corinthians by descent, like Bellerophon himself, and we speak Peloponnesian. Dorian women may lawfully speak Doric, I presume?”

This is enough to silence the critic, but the other young woman also turns upon him, and we may suppose that he is glad to escape from their tongues. And then everybody becomes silent, for the religious services begin. The priestess,

a comely girl, chants the psalm of Adonis, the beautiful old pagan hymn, more beautiful and more sensuous than anything uttered by the later religious poets of the West; and all listen in delighted stillness. As the hymn ends, Gorgo bursts out in exclamation of praise:

“Praxinoë, the woman is cleverer than we fancied! Happy woman to know so much, thrice happy to have so sweet a voice. Well, all the same, it is time to be making for home. Diocleides has not had his dinner, and the man is all vinegar, — don’t venture near him when he is kept waiting for dinner. Farewell, beloved Adonis, may you find us glad at your next coming!”

And with this natural mingling of the sentimental and the commonplace the little composition ends. It is as though we were looking through some window into the life of two thousand years ago. Read the whole thing over to yourselves when you have time to find the book in the library, and see how true to human nature it is. There is nothing in it except the wonderful hymn, which does not belong to to-day as much as to the long ago, to modern Tokyo as much as to ancient Greece. That is what makes the immortality of any literary production—not simply truth to the life of one time, but truth to the life of every time and place.

Not many years ago there was discovered a book by Herodas, a Greek writer of about the same period. It is called the “Mimes,” a series of little dramatic studies picturing the life of the time. One of these is well worthy of rank with the idyl of Theocritus above mentioned. It is the study of a conversation between a young woman and an old woman. The young woman has a husband, who left her to join a military expedition and has not been heard of for several years. The old woman is a go-between, and she comes to see the young person on behalf of another young man, who admires her. But as soon as she states the nature of her errand, the young lady becomes very angry and feigns much virtuous indignation. There is a quarrel. Then the two become friends, and we know that the old

woman's coming is likely to bring about the result desired. Now the wonder of this little study also is the play of emotion which it reveals. Such emotions are common to all ages of humanity; we feel the freshness of this reflection as we read, to such a degree that we cannot think of the matter as having happened long ago. Yet even the city in which these episodes took place has vanished from the face of the earth.

In the case of the studies of peasant life, there is also value of another kind. Here we have not only studies of human nature, but studies of particular social conditions. The quarrels of peasants, half good-natured and nearly always happily ending; their account of their sorrows; their gossip about their work in the fields—all this might happen almost anywhere and at almost any time. But the song contest, the prize given for the best composition upon a chosen subject, this is particularly Greek, and has never perhaps existed outside of some place among the peasant folk. It was the poetical side of this Greek life of the peasants, as recorded by Theocritus, which so much influenced the literatures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France and in England. But neither in France nor in England has there ever really been at any time, any life resembling that portrayed by Theocritus; to-day nothing appears to us more absurd than the eighteenth century habit of picturing the Greek shepherd life in English or French landscapes. What really may have existed among the shepherds of the antique world could not possibly exist in modern times. But how pretty it is! I think that the tenth idyl of Theocritus is perhaps the prettiest example of the whole series, thirty in number, which have been preserved for us. The plan is of the simplest. Two young peasants, respectively named Battus and Milon, meeting together in the field, talk about their sweethearts. One of them works lazily and is jeered by the other in consequence. The subject of the jeering acknowledges that he works badly because his mind is disturbed—he has fallen in love. Then

the other expresses sympathy for him, and tells him that the best thing he can do to cheer himself up will be to make a song about the girl, and to sing it as he works. Then he makes a song, which has been the admiration of the world for twenty centuries and has been translated into almost every language possessing a literature.

“Ye Muses Pierian, sing ye with me the slender maiden, for whatsoever ye do but touch, ye goddesses, ye make wholly fair.

“They all call thee a *gipsy*, gracious Bombyca, and *lean*, and *sunburnt*, 'tis only I that call thee *honey-pale*.

“Yea, and the violet is swart, and swart the lettered hyacinth, but yet these flowers are chosen the first in garlands.

“The goat runs after cytissus, the wolf pursues the goat, the crane follows the plough, but I am wild for love of thee.

“Would it were mine, all the wealth whereof once Cræsus was lord, as men tell! Then images of us twain, all in gold, should be dedicated to Aphrodite, thou with thy flute, and a rose, yea, or an apple, and I in fair attire, and new shoon of Amyclæ on both my feet.

“Ah, gracious Bombyca, thy feet are fashioned like carven ivory, thy voice is drowsy sweet, and thy ways, I cannot tell of them!”

Even through the disguise of an English prose translation, you will see how pretty and how simple this little song must have been in the Greek, and how very natural is the language of it. Our young peasant has fallen in love with the girl who is employed to play the flute for the reapers, as the peasants like to work to the sound of music. His comrades do not much admire Bombyca; one calls her “a long grasshopper of a girl”; another finds her too thin; a third calls her a gipsy, such a dark brown her skin has become by constant exposure to the summer sun. And the lover, looking at her, is obliged to acknowledge in his own mind that she is long and lean and dark and like a gipsy; but he finds beauty in all these characteristics, nevertheless.

What if she is dark? The sweetest honey is darkish, like amber, and so are beautiful flowers, the best of all flowers, flowers given to Aphrodite; and the sacred hyacinth on whose leaves appear the letters of the word of lamentation "Ai! Ai!"—that is also dark like Bombyca. Her darkness is that of honey and flowers. What a charming apology! He cannot deny that she is long and lean, and he remains silent on these points, but here we must all sympathize with him. He shows good taste. It is the tall slender girl that is really the most beautiful and the most graceful, not the large-limbed, strong-bodied peasant type that his companions would prefer. Without knowing it, he has fallen in love like an artist. And he is not blind to the grace of slenderness and of form, though he cannot express it in artistic language. He can only compare the shape of the girl's feet to the ivory feet of the divinities in the temples—perhaps he is thinking of some ivory image of Aphrodite which he has seen. But how charming an image does he make to arise before us! Beautiful is the description of the girl's voice as "drowsy sweet." But the most exquisite thing in the whole song is the final despairing admission that he cannot describe her at all—"and thy ways, I cannot tell of them!" This is one of the most beautiful expressions in any poem ancient or modern, because of its supreme truth. What mortal ever could describe the charm of manner, voice, smile, address, in mere words? Such things are felt, they cannot be described; and the peasant boy reaches the highest height of true lyrical poetry when he cries out "I cannot tell of them!" The great French critic Sainte-Beuve attempted to render this line as follows—"Quant à la manière, je ne puis la rendre!" This is very good; and you can take your choice between it and any English translation. But good judges say that nothing in English or French equals the charm of the original.

You will find three different classes of idyls in Theocritus; the idyl which is a simple song of peasant life, a pure lyric expressing only a single emotion; the idyl which is a little

story, usually a story about the gods or heroes; and lastly, the idyl which is presented in the form of a dialogue, or even of a conversation between three or four persons. All these forms of idyl, but especially the first and the third, were afterwards beautifully imitated by the Roman poets; then very imperfectly imitated by modern poets. The imitation still goes on, but the very best English poets have never really been able to give us anything worthy of Theocritus himself.

However, this study of the Greek model has given some terms to English literature which every student ought to know. One of these terms is *amœbæan*,—*amœbæan* poetry being dialogue poetry composed in the form of question and reply. The original Greek signification was that of alternate speaking. Please do not forget the word. You may often find it in critical studies, in essays upon contemporary literature; and when you see it again, remember Theocritus and the school of Greek poets who first introduced the charm of *amœbæan* poetry. I hope that this little lecture will interest some of you in Theocritus sufficiently to induce you to read him carefully through and through. But remember that you cannot get the value of even a single poem of his at a single reading. We have become so much accustomed to conventional forms of literature that the simple art of poetry like this quite escapes us at first sight. We have to read it over and over again many times, and to think about it; then only we feel that wonderful charm.